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ABSTRACT

Analysis of responses of 50 New Jersey teachers who are also parents elicited during one-hour interviews revealed that: (1) when teachers became parents they more fully understood parents and could relate to them more fully; (2) teachers believed they developed a broadened perspective toward their children; (3) teachers used the knowledge gleaned from teaching with their children; and (4) the patience expended in the classroom depleted teachers' reserves for their children. The interviews were guided by a set of prepared questions but also included amplifications and digressions by the teachers. The interview approach was intended to provide interviewees with an opportunity to discover meaning and understanding through the interview process. (IAH)

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INTERVIEWING AS A MODE OF INQUIRY INTO TEACHING-PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE DUAL ROLE

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Interviewing as a Mode of Inquiry into Teaching-Parents' Perceptions of the Dual Role

Introduction/Objectives

This is a study of 50 elementary, middle and high school teachers who are also parents. It reveals through an analysis of tape-recorded interviews the teachers' beliefs about the effects of the dual role. Some of the issues the study explores are: (1) how being a parent affects one as a teacher, (2) how teaching affects parenting, (3) what factors contribute to the positive and negative aspects of being a teaching-parent, (4) what knowledge have teaching-parents derived from the dual role which might be useful to other parents and to teachers who are not parents. This paper will focus on the themes which emerged from an analysis of the interview responses to the two issues of how being a parent affected one as a teacher and how teaching affected parenting.

Perspectives/Theoretical Framework

While teaching and parenting are different experiences, they share common elements. We teach and nurture in each role. The setting we work in as teachers and mothers (leaving fathers aside for the moment) has similarities: the privacy (some have said loneliness) of the classroom is not unlike the "exile of domesticity" (Grumet, 1988). Although there seems to be sufficient overlap in teaching and parenting to warrant exploration, few studies of parents who teach at elementary through high school levels have been reported.

Kepler-Zumwalt (1986) has compared the similarities and differences between a beginning teacher and a new mother. The positive effects of being a teaching-mother of kindergarten and elementary school students have been reported (Claesson, 1986; Lightfoot, 1978; Seltz, 1972). Negative effects, such as unduly high expectations of their children and themselves, were found by Katz (1980) in a study of nursery/kindergarten teaching-mothers. Other negative aspects of being a teaching-parent are described by Spencer, 1986, De Long,1986 and McPherson,1972.

When Lortie (1975) compared teaching to other kinds of work, he concluded that teachers confront a "unique set of difficulties...work[ing] with inherently changeful materials" (p. 136). Parents, too, contend with the changeful nature of children. "As soon as you figure out one stage, the child is well into another" (Sills and Henry, 1980, p.9). In this study I have collected and classified what people who both live and work with the changeful nature of children have to say about the dual role.

Method

I deliberately chose interviewing as a method of inquiry because I thought it would best capture the teachers' perceptions of their dual role. I share with Gilligan (1982) the view that "how people talk about their lives is of significance and the language they use and the connections they make reveal the world that they see" (1982, p.2). The

interviews were guided by a set of prepared questions but also included the amplifications and digressions which the teachers wanted to make to fully answer the questions. I had two motives in giving the teachers the leeway to talk about aspects of the questions which engrossed them. Firstly, I thought they might be more likely to reveal the truth as they saw it, and secondly they might reach some realization of which they were not previously aware. Many of the teachers said they were expressing ideas they had not realized they had. My approach to interviewing is in the "new tradition" -if that is not an oxymoron- of research interviewing (Mishler, 1986) in which the interviewee may discover meaning and understanding through the actual interview process. While these interviews were not "unstructured" as they are in narrative inquiry (Connally & Clandinin, 1990), they were clearly different from those which ask interviewees to fit their responses into pre-existing categories.

The interviews often resembled conversations. When the teachers expressed thoughts that were familiar to me, I would reveal my feelings and experiences. My interviewing behavior was influenced by what I know about classroom discussion-leading (MacDonald, 1986). A central goal of mine as a teacher is to stimulate students' expression of ideas in discussions. Two teaching behaviors which generate student participation and are germane to interviewing are to reveal one's own thinking and to restate what a participant has

said. These "techniques" seem to permit the interviewee or student to continue to develop their thought. In studies of ethnographic interviewing, Spradley (1979) said about restating, "[it] embodies the nonjudgmental attitude which contributes directly to rapport."(p.81).

The interviews were conducted in the teachers' schools and lasted approximately one hour. They were recorded on audiotape and transcribed by me. Like Mishler (1986), I found it crucial to tape record the teachers' words in order to analyze the interviews for common themes of meaning.

My definition of what constitutes a theme may be construed as somewhat arbitrary. My approach to identifying themes was to note patterns of similarity of meaning as the teachers "talked on" (explained and amplified) their response to the question. For example, the teachers said that the most profound influence of parenting on teaching was a heightened empathy for parents. Some teachers identified this as a significant effect at the beginning of their response. Others ruminated and seemed to think aloud until they arrived at that view.

Data Source: The Setting and the Subjects

The study took place in eight schools in New Jersey. Fifty female and male white, middle class teachers of elementary, middle and high school students volunteered to participate. They knew nothing about the study except that it concerned teaching and parenting. Collectively, the teachers have taught from three to 30 years on grade levels one through 12.

Most (ninety percent) were teachers before becoming parents and so could reflect on their teaching behavior before and after being in a parent role. They range in age from 35 to 55. Sixty percent of the teachers are women. Ninety percent are currently married. They have from one to five children of their own.

Results

Analysis of the responses to the question, "Do you think being a parent has influenced you as a teacher?" resulted in classifying them into three themes of influence: (1)parental, (2)affective/academic, and (3)social/home. (The paper also includes subthemes within the three themes and examples from the transcripts). The parental category represents the teachers' ideas about how being a teaching-parent affected their attitudes toward and relations with parents of their students. When the teachers became parents they more fully understood parents and could relate to them more easily. This theme of enhanced understanding of parents was the most frequently mentioned effect of parenting on teaching. The affective/academic category identifies changes teachers described in their attitudes towards students and in their teaching behavior as a result of being a parent. The social/home category refers to the comments the teachers made about how knowledge of their own children's home and social pressures enhanced their understanding of their students. (Four teachers said being a parent had no influence on them

as teachers.)

Three themes emerged from an analysis of the teachers' responses to the question of how teaching affected parenting: (1) teachers believed they developed a broadened perspective toward their children; (2) they used the knowledge gleaned from teaching with their children; (3) the patience expended in the classroom depleted their reserve for their children. (Seven teachers said teaching did not affect their parenting)

Conclusion/Implications

My interviewing behavior was developed from the point of view that research which reveals the feelings and perceptions of respondents is as worthy as that which measures tangible effects (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990). The efficacy of this approach is dependent upon the participants' ability and willingness to conjecture and introspect. Most of the teachers in this study found this task stimulating rather than burdensome due, I believe, to their interest in the issue of the relatedness of parenting to teaching. The emergence of common themes was the result of an analysis of the teachers' words for their meaning (as in grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and the teachers' willingness to search for and reveal their views of the dual role.

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